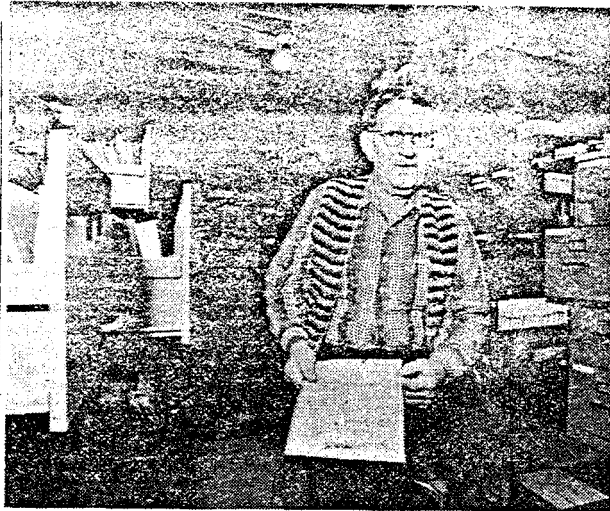




—Special to the Times Herald

Weisberg in basement with Kennedy assassination files

## Ex-reporter unofficial filer of information on JFK assassination

By SARAH PATTEE

Special to the Times Herald

FREDERICK, Md. — Down in Harold Weisberg's basement, rows of filing cabinets, 68 in all, snake across the floor. Stacks of bulging boxes tower over smaller piles of cartons in several corners.

From this room, Weisberg for 18 years has conducted his one-man investigation into the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Weisberg's argument is simple: The government botched the investigation. He charges that the FBI, CIA and Warren Commission, among others, "phonied, misrepresented, withheld and destroyed vital evidence." To find out why, he has devoted his life to breathing down the government's neck.

Unlike other assassination buffs, Weisberg says, he isn't trying to solve the crime, and that the crime probably never will be solved.

"I don't know who killed Kennedy, and if anyone says he knows, he's lying," he says.

Opinions differ about Weisberg's work.

Bernard Fensterwald, a Washington lawyer and fellow assassination buff, calls Weisberg "the dean of all the researchers. He makes me look like a 12-year-old shoe salesman."

Dallas County District Attorney Henry Wade, who carries on an irregular correspondence with Weisberg, is less effusive.

"Harold can probably render some good. He's sincere, but he's not right. I've an idea that he's a great problem for the FBI," he said.

A former chicken farmer, Senate investigator and reporter, Weisberg lives with his wife in this agricultural community about an hour's drive north of Washington. Despite the complexity of his work, he is a simple, unassuming man, right down to the holes in his slippers.

His face has settled into comfortable folds and lines. His hair stands up in short grey tufts, and a faint, scraggly moustache outlines his lip. In his late 60s, Weisberg looks and acts the country farmer, proudly recalling his former title of "National Barbecue King".

To gather his evidence in his investigation, Weisberg repeatedly has sued the FBI, CIA and the Justice Department to force them to turn over documents under the Freedom of Information Act. That law, passed in 1966, requires federal agencies to release most official in-

formation that doesn't relate to private citizens.

One of Weisberg's landmark suits helped convince Congress to strengthen the information act in 1974.

Weisberg has had few such successes. His seven books sold poorly. Half of his suits are still tied up in court. His thriving farm went under after helicopters, landing at a nearby military base, "drove my chickens crazy."

And then there are those who scoff at him.

"I used to care when people called me nuts, but not anymore," he says.

He has none of the slickness that seems to accompany other assassination authors, aficionados and freaks, some of whom purport that Kennedy's coffin was switched on the plane or that Russians were responsible, or the Mafia, or that Lyndon Johnson engineered the whole thing.

The investigation has embroiled Weisberg in a series of feuds.

David Lifton, author of the best-selling "Best Evidence," claims Weisberg's files are open to everyone, but "off limits" to him.

"Harold is extraordinarily eccentric, very volatile and not diplomatic," he says.

Fensterwald says Weisberg is "irascible as hell ... but 100 per cent intellectually honest. He helped us an enormous amount."

Weisberg says he has financed his work "haphazardly," helped by lecture fees and his Social Security check. His lawyer, Jim Lesar, does not charge him. Frugal living helps.

The son of Russian immigrants, Weisberg says he perseveres because he wants to make this country better.

"Government dishonesty after the assassination is the single biggest case of people's disillusion and distrust in the system today. The FBI did so many terrible things to so many people. It ought not happen. The American people ought not be the target of any intelligence agency," he says.

Weisberg insists he's helping, not harming, the federal government. By exposing its wrongs, he hopes to make society function better, and perhaps prevent deaths like Kennedy's or Martin Luther King's.

"I am working in the old American tradition of people participating in the functioning of society. Most people forget that citizens can be responsible for change," he says.

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